

Student Perspectives On Behaviors That Constitute Cheating

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ABSTRACT

A previous study conducted a decade ago determined that there can be considerable disagreement—not only between students and faculty, but also among students and among faculty—regarding behaviors that constitute cheating. This article reports the results of a research study that replicated the student survey administered for the previous study, but with changes in the questionnaire to reflect how technology has become infused in teaching and the assessment of learning. Recommendations for preventing academic dishonesty are also provided.

Keywords: Academic Integrity; Academic Dishonesty; Cheating; Plagiarism

INTRODUCTION

In a previous study conducted a decade ago (Higbee & Thomas, 2002), we learned that there can be considerable disagreement—not only between students and faculty, but also among students and among faculty—regarding what behaviors are cheating, what are permissible “short cuts”, and what behaviors might even be laudable learning and studying strategies. The questionnaire for the 2002 study was an extension of items provided in the text (Gardner & Jewler, 1995) for a first-year experience course at another institution. Meanwhile, technological advances have made it even easier for students to cheat and for faculty to identify plagiarism in students’ work. Furthermore, the paradigm shift from teaching to learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995) has resulted in an expansion of the toolbox of strategies that faculty use to assess student learning. However, many faculty members continue to limit class discussions about academic integrity to conversations about copying another student’s test paper or cutting and pasting content for term papers. It is critical that faculty address the broad spectrum of ever-changing types of behaviors that can constitute cheating, from copying from Internet-based content-sharing and social networking sites (Turnitin, 2011) to collaborating on take-home examinations or swiping another student’s identification card for purposes of attendance records. This type of class discussion can play an important role in promoting academic integrity and preventing academic dishonesty (Thomas & Higbee, 2000). In some cases, it is the failure of faculty to provide clear guidelines that creates misunderstandings about which behaviors are acceptable and which are not in any given course.

This article reports the results of a research study that replicated the student survey administered for the 2002 study, but with changes in the questionnaire to reflect how technology has become infused in teaching and the assessment of learning. Recommendations for preventing academic dishonesty will also be provided.

METHOD

In fall 2009 students participating in PsTL 1086: The First-Year Experience at a large public research university in the Midwestern region of the U.S. responded anonymously to the Academic Honesty Questionnaire (see Figure 1) in class as a precursor to discussion of academic integrity during the second week of their first semester at the university. Of the 156 students enrolled in the course, 143 completed the questionnaire; of these, 135 provided informed consent to have their results used for research purposes.

For each item, students had three response choices: “yes” (it is cheating), “no” (it is not cheating), or “depends”, with the opportunity to describe specific circumstances that might dictate whether the behavior is allowable. The questionnaire was designed to elicit comments from students to help clarify why some of these issues are not as simple as they may appear at first glance. It was understood that several items involve compound situations with multiple layers, and without clear answers. Themes were determined for the responses to the open-ended comments, which were then coded by theme.

Figure 1. Full Text of Items From the Academic Honesty Questionnaire

Academic Honesty Questionnaire

Directions: Review the behaviors listed below. Circle Y for “yes” by any that you think constitute cheating. Circle N for “no” by those that you think are legitimate shortcuts or reasonable behaviors. Circle D for “depends” if your response depends on specific circumstances not provided in the behavioral description. If you circle D for an item, please describe the circumstances.

1. Proofreading or typing a paper for a friend and making the corrections yourself
 2. Proofreading a paper for a friend and circling errors
 3. Using your cell phone to send or receive text messages or photos during an exam
 4. Discussing ideas for a paper with a friend while in the process of writing it
 5. Using someone else’s ideas or ideas from a paper you have purchased over the Internet as the foundation for a paper you are writing
 6. Cutting and pasting phrases, sentences, or paragraphs from the Internet or other sources into a paper that you are writing for class
 7. Changing actual laboratory results in a lab report to reflect what you know the results should have been rather than reporting the results of your own experiment
 8. Turning in the same paper for two different courses
 9. Turning in two different papers based on the same library research for two different courses
 10. Studying from old exams previously given in the same course by the same instructor
 11. Preparing for exams with a study group in which each person develops review materials for a portion of the course
 12. Asking someone who has already taken the same exam in the same course in the same academic term (e.g., during an earlier class period) about the test questions
 13. Making arrangements with other students to take turns going to lecture and taking notes
 14. Signing an absent friend’s name to an attendance list or scanning an ID for him/her in a large lecture course
 15. Copying lecture notes from a friend after missing a class
 16. Asking another student how or collaborating with other students to complete homework assignments
 17. Copying another student’s answer to a homework problem you do not understand
 18. Including an article in a reference list when you have not read it, or have only read the abstract
 19. Using published summaries and/or study guides to assist in understanding reading assignments
 20. Reading published summaries and/or study guides (e.g., Cliff Notes) instead of reading assigned works of literature
 21. Watching the film version of a work of fiction rather than reading the assigned book
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RESULTS

Quantitative results for each item are provided in Table 1. However, for many of the items it was the “depends” open-ended responses regarding specific circumstances that provided the most insight into student perspectives on why a behavior might or might not be considered cheating. In the third column of Table 1 the first number indicates how many students responded “depends”, while the number after the slash indicates how many students provided additional comments. In most instances, students who answered “depends” did provide explanations, and for many items a few students who responded definitively that a behavior was or was not cheating still wrote explanations for their responses, so it is not unusual in Table 1 for the second number in the third column to be greater than the number preceding the slash.

Table 1. Academic Honesty Questionnaire Results

Item	Yes	No	Depends/Reasons	n
Typing or proofreading & making corrections for a friend	74	13	48/46	135
Proofreading & circling errors for a friend	6	128	1/ 2	135
Sending or receiving texts or photos during an exam	105	7	19/23	131
Discussing ideas for a paper with a friend	5	109	20/22	134
Using someone else's ideas as the foundation for a paper	110	9	16/17	135
Cutting and pasting from the Internet or other sources	92	3	40/47	135
Changing results in a lab report	120	6	6/ 6	132
Turning in the same paper for two different courses	67	28	40/42	135
Turning in different papers based on the same research	12	112	11/13	135
Studying from old exams by the same instructor	17	90	28/33	135
Preparing a portion of exam review to study w/group	7	126	2/ 4	135
Asking about the test questions from an earlier class period	74	35	26/27	135
Taking turns going to lecture and taking notes	72	42	20/25	134
Signing or scanning an ID for an absent friend	124	6	4/ 7	134
Copying lecture notes from a friend after missing a class	8	116	9/14	133
Asking another student or collaborating on homework	12	99	24/24	135
Copying another student's answer to a homework	100	10	24/24	134
Including a reference when you have not read it	93	29	13	135
Using published summaries to assist in understanding	10	121	3/ 5	134
Reading published summaries instead of assigned works	68	52	13/22	133
Watching the film version rather than reading the book	69	52	13/21	134

Note: The full text for each item is provided in Figure 1

Typing or Proofreading and Making Corrections for a Friend

For the first item, "Proofreading or typing a paper for a friend and making the corrections yourself" (74 yes, 13 no, 48 depends), it was clear from the responses that students today equate typing a paper for someone with actually writing the paper for someone. Gone are the days when students wrote out a paper longhand and then either typed the paper or had someone else type it. Fortunately, of the 48 students who responded, "depends", 46 provided reasons to clarify their answers. Of these, 12 indicated that typing a paper for a friend is not acceptable, but from their explanations their interpretation of this item becomes more understandable: "I don't think proofreading is cheating. Sometimes it helps to have a different perspective. But I do think typing someone else's paper is cheating." "Proofreading is ok, but typing the paper means you are just doing the work for them." "Typing the whole paper is wrong. Proofreading is fine, as long as you point out their mistakes so they learn." Another student clarified, "Proofreading is okay, but actually writing it for someone isn't okay." Only one student interpreted the item as intended by its authors: "I would type a paper they wrote first or check for basic errors like spelling and punctuation, but nothing more."

Nine students indicated that making corrections is acceptable if the friend is present and errors are explained: "If your friend asks you to help and the friend is present while making the corrections while you are explaining the corrections to them—then it's ok." "If you talk it out." "If I showed them why I made these corrections." "If the paper owner is right there and you are explaining it then it is okay. It's still their work." "Explain to them what they did wrong so they can learn from their mistakes." Four students specified that the friend authoring the paper should be making the corrections:

I think it is totally legitimate to have a friend proofread, and suggest corrections, it's not cheating if these corrections are going to be made anyway, but it is wrong to be lazy and make a friend change them for you.

Six students responded that whether this behavior is cheating depends on the type of errors and corrections: "Small grammar errors are ok, not concept errors." "I think it's okay to change some minor errors but not whole paragraphs." Other conditions under which students thought it was permissible to make corrections included when the paper is just a rough draft or when engaged in peer editing. Only one student mentioned checking with the instructor: "If the teacher allows it. Proofreading should be ok but making corrections yourself might not be acceptable."

Ultimately, it is clear that the first item has not stood the test of time and should be revised to be more clear: “Proofreading a paper for a friend, whether in paper or electronic format, and making corrections.” The second item on the questionnaire, “Proofreading a paper for a friend and circling errors”, involved much less uncertainty, with 128 of 135 respondents indicating that this is not cheating.

Using Electronic Devices During an Examination

Many faculty members in the U.S. ban all electronic devices from the classroom during the administration of exams. Our own policy is that cell phones must not only be off (as opposed to set on “vibrate”), but they also must be put away (e.g., in the student’s backpack), not on the desk or in a pocket until the student leaves the exam room. Although the items asking about “Using your cell phone to send or receive text messages or photos during an exam” elicited 105 responses indicating that this is cheating, 7 students said no, it is not cheating, and 19 indicated that it depends. Of the 23 who provided explanations, 13 said it was cheating if the cell phone use was related to the exam, while 6 noted that it was not cheating unless related to the test: “If is about info on the test then yes it’s cheating but if in figuring out where lunch is then it’s okay but I would just turn off the phone all together.” One student wrote, “Not technically cheating but the prof[essor] will assume you are.” Another noted, “If you forgot to turn it off and you randomly receive a text, it’s not cheating.” Five students commented that it may not be cheating, but that does not necessarily mean it is acceptable: “You shouldn’t be doing it to start but it may not be about the test.” “Depends on what the texts say, but either way there shouldn’t be phones at [exams].” “Not cheating unless it’s stuff on test. Just disruptive.” “If it has nothing to do with a test then it’s okay (just rude).”

Plagiarism on Papers

Where do the boundaries of plagiarism begin and end? Does the term apply only to copying someone’s words, or does it also include using someone else’s ideas? To what extent can individuals lay claim to intellectual property? The fourth item asks about “Discussing ideas for a paper with a friend while in the process of writing it.” An overwhelming majority of students (109 of 134) did not consider this cheating. Of the 20 who thought it might depend on the circumstances, 6 approved of the idea of brainstorming with others: “It helps to brainstorm. It will still be in your own words. Don’t use all the same ideas but a couple are okay.” Meanwhile, two specifically mentioned that it is acceptable to ask others for their opinion. Six students noted that most of the ideas in the paper should be those of the student writing it: “There’s a line that should not be crossed for ex., you should have thought of most the points. They [other students] should have not.” Five students thought that what is important is that students write in their own words. Only one student mentioned that it is important to cite the source of all ideas contributed by others.

Of 135 respondents, 110 thought that “Using someone else’s ideas or ideas from a paper you have purchased over the Internet as the foundation for a paper you are writing” is cheating. Three of the students who responded “depends” thought it is acceptable to look at others’ ideas to get started, and nine answered that it is not cheating as long as the sources are cited: “If I liked the topic, doing my own research on that topic is okay, but using that person’s opinions or information without citing is not clear.” Another student wrote, “You can interpret someone’s ideas as long as you cite them appropriately.” One student indicated that paraphrasing is allowed, but two students did not approve of purchasing a paper under any circumstances.

Item 6, “Cutting and pasting phrases, sentences, or paragraphs from the Internet or other sources into a paper that you are writing for class”, was considered cheating by 92 of the 135 students responding, but 40 students thought it “depends” and 47 wrote comments. For 38 of the students, the primary consideration is citing the source: “If you cite then no, if you don’t cite then yes that’s cheating.” “If you cite your sources in the proper format then it is ok.” “If you do not want it to be considered cheating, then you have to cite the source from where you found the information.” Interestingly, only 10 students mentioned the use of direct quotations: “If quoting, citing, and discussing those pieces then ok. Otherwise no.” “If it is a direct quote, no, but it must be cited.” Two students indicated that the whole paper could not be made up of material cut-and-pasted, only one used the word *plagiarism* in the response, and only one mentioned asking the teacher.

Falsifying Laboratory Results

The next item asked about “Changing actual laboratory results in a lab report to reflect what you know the results should have been rather than reporting the results of your own experiment.” The vast majority of students (120 of 132) understood that this is not appropriate. Of the six students who provided comments, three wrote about indicating the error: “Is okay as long as you mention your error in the lab.” “You can just explain why data is off. Not your true values.” “If you had a major error and your teacher lets you change em [*sic*].”

Using the Same Paper for Multiple Assignments

Item 8 addressed “Turning in the same paper for two different courses” (67 yes, 28 no, 40 depends), while item 9 was “Turning in two different papers based on the same library research for two different courses” (12 yes, 112 no, 11 depends). For item 8, 16 students suggested asking the instructor, and of these, five noted that both teachers need to be asked; for item 9 only three students mentioned asking the instructor. Nine of the students responding “depends” on item 8 focused on the paper being the student’s own work, while 13 asserted that if the assignments are the same, then it is not cheating to use the same paper: “If it’s the exact same assignment and you wrote it yourself & your papers would look the same anyways then it’s ok.” “If it relates to both and will get you a good score in both I don’t think it would necessarily be cheating.” “If a similar paper is needed for two courses and you wrote it, it’s fine.” “If they ask to write on the same topic, why write 2 dif[ferent] papers?” One student asserted, “Maybe you can use some parts but not the whole paper.” One student admitted not knowing: “I really do not know, but I am thinking ‘yes’.”

Studying for Exams

Item 10 addressed “Studying from old exams previously given in the same course by the same instructor”, which 90 of 135 students did not consider cheating. For 18 of the students it mattered that the old tests were provided by the instructor: “If the teacher provided the tests as a study guide or gave permission it is ok. Otherwise, no because they may be stolen.” “If the instructor gives you the test to practice.” Seven students indicated that it is important to let the professor know that they are studying from old exams: “As long as you let the professor know and they believe it’s an ok way to study.” “If professor says ok (ex. My psych study guides on WebVista [online course management system] are last semester’s tests).” Six students specified that the test be their own (e.g., a test taken earlier in the term to be used as preparation for a cumulative final exam). “If they are your exams & the teacher gave them out for studying purposes then why not!”

The next item asked about “Preparing for exams with a study group in which each person develops review materials for a portion of the course.” The vast majority of responding students did not consider this practice cheating, while four provided helpful comments: “Studying in a group is fine, but everyone needs to pitch in.” “But it would be wise to review materials on your own as well, just in case.” “Sometime I work better alone.” “Sharing ideas.”

The last item related to test preparation was, “Asking someone who has already taken the same exam in the same course in the same academic term (e.g., during an earlier class period) about the test questions.” Students were divided on this item, with 74 considering this cheating, 35 not, and 26 indicating that it depends, with 27 providing comments. Students thought it is acceptable to ask what to study, just to get an idea of what the test covers (7 comments) or about the format of the test (2), or to ask if the test is hard (8), but not to ask for specific questions (14) or answers (10), or as long as the answers will not be the same across sections (1).

Attending Class and Taking Notes

Item 13 queried about “Making arrangements with other students to take turns going to lecture and taking notes.” Again, students were split in their responses, with 72 believing that this is cheating, 42 saying no, and 20 using the “depends” response. Six students indicated that this is not “smart” and that students are only hurting themselves: “I don’t think it’s cheating but you will do poorly in class.” “We won’t get the adequate information.” Three students indicated that it may not be cheating, but that does not make it “right.” Some students thought it

depended on whether the student could not go to class (2), or more specifically if the student is sick (3) or has to be away (2). One student referred to this practice as “lazy”, two mentioned the need to prioritize if too busy, and one responded, “I wouldn’t exactly see that is cheating, but it is your own responsibility to learn the course material.” Finally, one student noted, “If you can [learn] as well by reading someone else’s notes.”

Out of 134 responding students, 124 considered item 14, “Signing an absent friend’s name to an attendance list or scanning an ID for him/her in a large lecture course”, cheating. The seven comments related to this item were inconsistent: “You are only hurting yourself by not being there.” “Same [as previous item], it’s not cheating, but dishonest.” “If they are in a desperate situation, family emergency.” “It is your friend’s responsibility to go to class—not yours.” “If I owe him a favor, for example.” “On how often you do it.” “If they are sick.”

Item 15 asked about “Copying lecture notes from a friend after missing a class”, which 116 of the 133 responding students did not consider cheating. Student comments (11 of 14) focused primarily on the reasons for the absences: “If you missed the lecture for an excused reason, if you just didn’t feel like showing up I wouldn’t want to give you my notes.” “It depends if you have a legitimate reason for missing, but you should always make sure you get the notes.” Three students suggested talking to the instructor: “As long as the professor knows you missed for a legit reason and knows you are getting notes from a friend.” “It would be wise to talk to the instructor as well though to see if additional material is needed.” “Ok as long as you have already talked to professor.”

Homework Issues

It was obvious from their responses to the next two items, “Asking another student how or collaborating with other students to complete homework assignments” (12 yes, 99 no, 24 depends) and “Copying another student’s answer to a homework problem you do not understand” (100 yes, 10 no, 24 depends), it was clear that students understood the difference. For the former, 11 students clarified that one student should not be copying from another or doing the work for another: “As long as you are not copying one another I think it is ok to discuss the questions.” “It’s ok to ask for help, but having them do it for you is cheating.” Two specified that all students in the group must be contributing to the work, and one wrote, “Depends on the effort you put in before asking.” Five students suggested checking with the teacher: “If the teacher feels that group collaboration is ok then you can, but if he/she says to work alone, you should.” Two thought it depended upon whether it is a group assignment, and for one it mattered if the homework is being graded: “Not if they are not graded & are only given for studying purposes.” For the latter item, which involved copying, 20 of the 24 open-ended responses focused on the material being explained to the student who does not understand and making sure the student learns how to do the work.

Reading Abstract Instead of Full Work Cited

In this age of electronic communications, today’s students seem more aware than those of the late 1990s of the difference between reading an abstract and reading the full work. In response to “Including an article in a reference list when you have not read it, or have only read the abstract”, 93 students said yes, this is cheating; 29 replied no, it is not cheating; and 13 chose depends. Two students indicated that it is fine to cite the abstract if the reference is also for the abstract. One student wrote, “It’s stupid too—faculty member has probably read the article.”

Using Published Summaries or Watching the Film

Items 19 and 20 addressed “Using published summaries and/or study guides to assist in understanding reading assignments” (10 yes, 121 no, 3 depends) and “Reading published summaries and/or study guides (e.g., Cliff Notes) instead of reading assigned works of literature” (68 yes, 52 no, 13 depends). Of the five students who provided comments related to item 19, two indicated that it is not cheating as long as the student also read the full book. One student noted that “Some professors allow or encourage this, but not always.” Another student wrote, “Not cheating, just lazy. I wouldn’t do it, just wouldn’t condemn it.”

For item 20, 22 students provided comments. Of these, 9 indicated that reading a summary instead of the assigned work is not a smart strategy and may hurt the student in the long run: “If you are willing to take the risk of

brief summaries of a book you will pay the price on the exam. Not cheating, it will just hurt the student later on.” Three indicated that “You can use it to help, but don’t rely on that” or something to that effect. Two referred to this as a choice, but three asserted that it is lazy to do so, while two mentioned that it is better to read the summary than nothing at all. Only two discussed asking the professor: “If the professor says not to use it and to read the book, and you do the opposite, then that is considered cheating.” “If it’s allowed.”

The responses for item 21, “Watching the film version of a work of fiction rather than reading the assigned book”, paralleled those for item 20, with 69 students responding ye, 52 no, and 13 depends. Of the 21 students providing comments, 8 said the student would just be hurting himself or herself: “Same as the above question. It will just hurt the student on a test, quiz, or discussion.” Five students referred to this as a choice that each student must make, and five noted that the book and film are seldom the same: “It is not considered cheating, but you will suffer because you have not read the assigned book and the movies are never the same as the book.” On the other hand, three students thought it depended “On how similar they are”, and one added, “Matter on if the book reading is mandatory and/or how well the movie is close to the book.” One student merely wrote, “I hate reading.”

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From these results it is clear that it is important for both students and faculty to understand that academic integrity can involve complex issues that do not necessarily have simple right-or-wrong answers. If faculty members do not agree with student perspectives, it is critical that they explain their own views. For example, when discussing using the same paper for multiple assignments, faculty who object might discuss whether the goal of these assignments is the final product (i.e., the paper), the tasks and thinking processes involved in writing the paper (e.g., developing and narrowing a topic, conducting research, synthesizing the ideas of others, applying knowledge acquired to real-life situations), or both. It might be assumed that writing two papers provides the student with twice as much practice in developing skills that are important to their future success, but students may never have considered this benefit of writing two separate papers.

This research has limitations, including that it involved only 135 students from a single institution, and that all of these students were first-semester freshmen who had not as yet written a college-level term paper or taken a cumulative final exam at the university. However, the most important implication of this study is probably not dependent on the specific results presented in this paper, but rather that it is critical for faculty and students to engage in extended conversations about academic honesty that consider a wide range of behaviors. One finding worth noting is that students seldom mentioned asking the faculty member if they had a question about whether a behavior is acceptable or not. Students can avoid charges of academic dishonesty by following a simple piece of advice: When in doubt, ask the instructor.

This research also sheds light on some steps that faculty can take to help prevent academic dishonesty:

- Discuss what kinds of assistance are allowable for writing papers.
- Share conceptions of intellectual property and to what extent ideas expressed in a paper must be the student’s own. In this discussion, consider different cultural interpretations of intellectual property rights.
- Provide guidelines for peer editing.
- In the syllabus and for assignments provide information about the institution’s definition of plagiarism.
- Make students aware of services that enable faculty to determine what proportion of a paper matches content written by others (e.g., Turnitin, 2011).
- Provide examples and resources for the citation and reference style being used in the course.
- Refer students to campus resources that provide appropriate assistance for paper writing.
- Discuss appropriate behaviors for students participating in study groups.
- Announce whether or not students are allowed to collaborate on homework assignments and take-home examinations.
- Explain the difference between criterion-referenced and norm-referenced grading and discuss the implications of sharing test questions and answers with other students who have not as yet taken the exam.

- Do not allow students to retain returned, graded exams unless anticipating that they may be passed along to future students.
- Create new exams every term and administer multiple forms to students sitting in proximity of one another or students in different course sections.
- State any attendance policies in the course syllabus, along with mechanisms for making up work when an absence is unavoidable.
- Explain the importance of attending class.
- Ensure that content discussed in class extends beyond that provided in the course text.
- Engage students in classroom activities that require the use of higher-order thinking skills.
- Discuss the difference between reading the original work (e.g., book, play) and using a published summary or study guide or watching the film version. Note: In the previous study (Higbee & Thomas, 2002), one faculty member pointed out that seeing a play performed (or the film version) may better represent the original intent of the playwright than reading the text of the play.

Faculty members who are more proactive about educating students about academic integrity issues are also likely to feel more comfortable reporting incidents of academic dishonesty because they will be confident that they have provided clear guidelines for students to follow. Faculty members who ignore incidents of cheating are devaluing the efforts of students who are honest in demonstrating their acquisition of knowledge. Cheating hurts everyone. Educating students about academic honesty is a critical function in higher education and in preparing students to be honest, trustworthy citizens.

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